Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 2: Imperial Japan: The Paths to War, Perspectives of Japanese Patriotism

Viewing: film segment, "Runaway Horses," from *Mishima*, 1986, Schrader,

short film, Rite of Love and Death (Patriotism), 1965,

Mishima, or excerpt from Mishima, 1986, Schrader, or excerpt from *The Strange Case of Yukio Mishima (*1985) A and E Biography.

Twenty-four Eyes, 1954, Kinoshita

No Regrets for Our Youth, 1946, Kurosawa

Chushingura (The Forty-seven Loyal Retainers), 1941, Mizoguchi

Great Admiral Yamamoto, 1987, A and E Biography

Hirohito, 1994, A and E Biography.

Suggested Readings:
Imperial Japan: Expansion and War, a Humanities Approach to Japanese History. Social Science Education Consortium, Bolder Colorado. Richard Minear. Through Japanese Eyes. A Cite Book, New York and London, 1994, p. 80-110.

Suggested grades: 10-12 and college, one to five class periods

Central idea:
This unit builds on the themes and materials of Imperial Japan: Expansion and War, Part III, A Humanities Approach to Japanese History, 1995, Social Science Education Consortium, Bolder, Colorado. In the first section of that curriculum package, the key questions are: "Why Empire? Why War?" The films suggested in this guide relate to the second section "Patriotism Reflected in Art and Literature," exploring the nature and function of "patriotism" in Japan's march toward empire and war through this period. The underlying question is, how did the people of this nation get swept into a war they had such little chance of winning?

Teaching:
The list of films represents a range of postwar Japanese perspectives looking back on the decade approaching the Asia-Pacific War. These include: young militant students and Army officers wanting to purge Japan of all Western influences; a young teacher and her students growing up on a small island in the Inland Sea; college students attending the politically and philosophically liberal Kyoto University; Admiral Yamamoto, the architect of the Pearl Harbor attack; and finally, Emperor Hirohito whose role in and responsibility for the war remain to this day ambiguous.

One of the films, Mizoguchi's *Chushingura*, the only film actually from the prewar period, is the sole example of what one study calls "The Monumental Style," an

example of the films which helped define the prewar national identity and militant spirit. This can provide a contrasting perspective to the postwar films which reflect the consciousness of the failure of Japan's military ambitions.

Obviously few courses, especially at the high school level, can afford the time to study this period or any of these films in depth. Thus, it is assumed that teachers will select from the following possibilities.

"Runaway Horses," a 28-minute segment from Schrader's Mishima, offers a dramatization of the basic plot and themes of Mishima's 1967-1968 novel *Runaway Horses*. The story is about 19-year old Isao who represents in Mishima's view the patriotic fervor of young Japanese in the prewar period and provides a foreshadowing of the author's own ritual suicide (seppuku). The setting is 1932-1933 Japan, a period of political unrest with young military officers and students plotting to assassinate leaders of government and business "corrupted" by Western capitalism and materialism. Isao plots with a group of fellow students to create an incident which would require martial law and restore the military to its rightful and traditional role of power under the Emperor.

A "little book" of a similar insurrection in 1873 with a group called "The League of the Divine Wind" is his inspiration. His group is known as the "Showa Divine Wind," in the author's view, representative of the noble spirit of the later kamikaze who would sacrifice their lives in defense of the homeland. Isao and his group, after they achieve their goals, intend to commit ritual seppuku to atone for their crimes. However, the plot is discovered and the young men are arrested before they can carry out their plan. Isao after a court trial is released because of his patriotic ideals and pure, youthful spirit. Unrepentant, he alone seeks out a key industrialist and assassinates him. Fleeing to a cliff overlooking the sea, he commits seppuku just as the sun rises.

Schrader's film segment of this novel is a twenty-eight minute surrealistic dramatization of the plot, interlaced with scenes of black and white flashbacks of Mishima's life and ideas behind the writing of the novel. To view and understand the full clip, students will need to know background on:

1. prewar Japanese government and society following the 1931 Manchurian Incident

2. Mishima's futile attempt in 1970 to spark a postwar restoration of belief in the traditional Japanese spiritual values and Emperor worship

3. director Schrader's use of black and white flashbacks to represent Mishima's life and ideas, and

4. the segment's use of surrealistic sets and colors to symbolize Mishima's ideas of the necessary unity of spirit, art, and action in achieving Japan's goals.

Notes: The film segment is found one hour and six minutes into the film. If the teacher wishes to edit out the flashbacks to Mishima's life and ideas, the segment on Runaway Horses alone is about fifteen minutes. The curriculum package Imperial Japan contains a printed scene from the novel and suggested teaching strategies and activities.

Rite of Love and Death, Mishima's short film version of his own story "Patriotism," is discussed in part I of this guide, but there, the emphasis is on the literary and biographical dimensions of the work. Here, the concern is for the historical context, the February 26, 1936 attempted insurrection by young army officers, the incident in the background of Mishima's story and the supposed reason for the ritual suicide of the main character.

Unfortunately copies of Mishima's film are rare and the suggested film clips from

Mishima and the A and E Biography are brief and hardly adequate for anything other than a few images of Mishima acting out the role. For a visual dramatization of the patriotic fervor of the young men, the excerpt from "Runaway Horses" may suffice. On the other hand, for a visual recreation and commentary on the actual insurrection, a five minute report entitled "Japan," from the 1935-1936 *Time Marches On* newsreel series is quite good. In fact, most of these news reports on pre-1937 Japan are, while cautious of its growing military strength and ambitions, sympathetic to the nation's political, military, and economic situation.

The focus in Mishima's story and film is on a lieutenant's reaction to the insurrection rather than on his actions in it. What Mishima is concerned about here is not the drama of Japan's "Runaway Horses," charging toward political action and historically toward war. Rather, Mishima is presenting a private and personal act which is also a symbol of the spiritual essence of patriotism. The lieutenant, unable to lead the loyal troops against his rebelling, patriotic friends, has only one honorable choice, seppuku. He and his wife are, like the young officers and later the kamikaze in the latter stages of the war in their pure faith, true heroes and patriots.

Comparing and contrasting the actual historic incident with Mishima's use of it can help the students understand both the collective state of mind of the young men in Japan's military prior to and during the war and the postwar attempts to separate the purity and idealism of those young warriors from the disaster of Japan's defeat. An excellent discussion of the 1936 incident is found in the first chapter of John Toland's The Rising Sun, 1970 (Random House).

The film *Twenty-four Eyes* is also discussed in part I with an emphasis on the teacher's and her young students' stories and experiences 1928 through the end of the war in 1945. The controlling theme is the farewell to the innocence of childhood. Appropriate to the study of different perspectives of prewar Japanese patriotism are the selections from the novel included in the curriculum package Imperial Japan, Expansion and War.

The first, excerpted from Chapter 6, deals with an incident at the middle school when a teacher is taken to the police station for questioning about his teaching of a collection of sixth grade essays advocating pacifism. The movement to eradicate all communist and capitalist influences is reaching the teachers and classrooms of small children (minutes 66-71 in the film). When Mrs. Oishi acknowledges reading parts of the collection to her class, the principal takes and burns her copy saying they had to remain loyal and patriotic subjects. Mrs. Oishi quietly protests but joins the other teachers in falling in line with government police policies.

In the second, from Chapter 7, the teacher is questioning her young students about their future expectations. The time is 1934, and the political climate is sweeping the public including her students toward war. When she expresses fear about their leanings toward the military and war rather than traditional occupations, such as fishermen and farmers, she is cautioned by them to be careful of "Red" thinking. The teacher's anti-war views and feelings are quickly repressed in resignation to a passive role as teacher, wife and mother (minutes 94-100 in the film).

Seven years later, in 1941, the students are marching off to war (minutes 108-120). This is a particularly moving scene. Mrs. Oishi has watched these boys grow up since they were children in her first grade class. Now they are soldiers in uniform, leaving the island. As the ferry pulls away from the pier, the young men hold white ribbons connecting them to their loved ones on shore. The camera reveals close-ups of their faces and eyes as the rolls of ribbon run out and trail away. We share Mrs. Oishi's sense of loss. We know few will return to the island alive, and none will ever know again the peace and innocence of their childhood on this island.

The problem in using this film or clips is that it is postwar revisionism. While the portrait of innocent children growing up in prewar rural areas and being swept as

victims into a war they will never understand may be in part true, it neglects the issue of public responsibility for that war and the suffering it caused throughout Asia. An interesting speculative question is what sort of soldiers would these children become? Were they capable of the barbarism of some Japanese military? Would they die willingly for the Emperor in a banzai charge or kamikaze attack?

No Regrets for Our Youth is another of those difficult-to-locate films, but the search is worthwhile. I suggest its use again in a later unit for its study of the change in a young woman through the war years. Here, the first 25 minutes of the film (or if a shorter clip is necessary, begin with the title 1933, minutes 6 through 16) presents a view of idealistic Kyoto University students demonstrating against the government's fascist policies repressing academic and human freedoms. Based on an actual case, the film has some historical credibility. Yet it is a 1946 film written and produced under the strict censorship codes of the American Occupation. Kyoko Hirano in *Mr. Smith Goes to Tokyo, Cinema Under the American Occupation* (Smithsonian Press, 1992) examines the film at length as an example of the "Democratic Film."

For the students, however, the clip serves to suggest there were patriotic dissenters in prewar Japan, but they were effectively repressed. Minutes 16 through 25 show the na•ve, easy compromises of both the professor and his students. Only Noge remains an activist fighting against the takeover of the society and government by the military.

Forty-seven Ronin: Although the historical incident on which this film is based occurred between 1701 and 1703, Davis in *Picturing Japaneseness* considers the 1941 film a classic example of the prewar "monumental style." In mythologizing Japan's cultural heritage this film, and others like it, had the goal of shaping the public's consciousness of Japan's national identity in service of the war effort in the late 1930s. Made just before the attack on Pearl Harbor, *Forty-seven Ronin* draws on the past as the model for the absolute loyalty and self-sacrifice expected of all Japanese.

For some unexplained reason this film alone, of the many prewar films of this type, continues to be shown on cable television and to be made available through distributors of video. The problem for teachers, however, is that it is far too long, 3 hours 44 minutes, slow in its development, and without much action. Also difficult for students is to understand how a two-hundred and thirty-seven year old story of forty-seven ronin carrying out an act of revenge and then committing mass-suicide could be seen as a quasi-religious symbol of the Japanese national spirit. Yet Davis makes a strong case for the film as a masterpiece of Japanese classical aesthetics defining what is essentially Japaneseness in this prewar period. He also believes that the style and structure of the film pull the viewer deep into a perceptual and personal experience of the recreated historic incident in a way that reverberates with the patriotism of the Japanese in this period.

Although I have never tried this film or a part of it with students, I do know of two high school teachers who have been developing a curriculum unit around the film and novel. On the strength of that promise and Davis' scholarly study of the film, I am suggesting a clip for this unit. Unlike the other postwar films, it is not influenced by anti-feudal and anti-military themes. It allows students a pure glimpse into and perhaps an experience of the patriotic fervor of late 1930s Japan. The final scene leading to the ritual suicide of the 47 ronin (a Japanese history book states there were only 46, that one dropped out) is complicated by the presence of a young girl who loves one of the young men scheduled to commit seppuku. She had been used by him to get information that would open the way for the 47 retainers to assassinate the man who was responsible for their lord's death. Now that the man is dead, and because they have been loyal in their duty to their lord, they will be allowed an honorable death by seppuku. The girl Omino has disguised herself as a boy to get access to the men. She wants to know whether the young man loved her or simply used her.

As the clip opens (125 minutes into Part II, the final 25 minutes of the film) Omino is talking to the leader Oishi trying to convince him to let her talk with her lover. Oishi feels the meeting would unsettle the young man's mind and his preparation for seppuku. This twist in the traditional plot should capture the students' attention and lead them to some understanding of the themes. Questions are: How does she convince Oishi to allow the meeting? What is the significance of her suicide in our response to the mass suicides? What is its significance to the patriotic themes of the film? Why does Mizoguchi mute the suicide of the 47 ronin, having them take place off stage? If the students have also studied the seppukus in Mishima's works, a revealing question is, what are the differences in our perceptions and reactions to Mizoguchi's and Mishima's presentations of the seppukus? What do you imagine were the reactions of the Japanese audiences to this film in 1941-1942? What connections might they make with Japan's wars first with China and then the United States?

The A and E *Biographies* of Admiral Yamamoto and Emperor Hirohito: In both these biographical portraits, the men were, at one time, perceived by Americans to be demonic leaders responsible for bringing war to America's peaceful shores. But over time both have emerged as complex, reluctant participants in the roles they were forced to play in Japan's march toward war and ultimate defeat. The main thematic questions these biographies present are not as important as the general insight they provide into the nature of prewar Japanese society and the decision-making process at all levels.

Yamamoto did not believe Japan could defeat the United States in a war. Yet he planned and executed the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Emperor, the symbol of the Japanese state and mission, apparently resisted many of the decisions which led Japan into war and continued it beyond all reason. Yet he avoided the final confrontations which might have resulted in a complete military takeover. A recent biography and film about General Tojo also tries to paint him as a patriot concerned about the nation, the emperor, and the Japanese people. Yet the war began and continued through the firebombings and finally the atomic bombs which resulted in around 400,000 civilian deaths, most of them in the final months. The bitter irony of this unit is that all the people portrayed and mentioned considered themselves patriotic doing what they believed was their duty, for the good of Japan and its people. Yet no one was ever responsible for its actions.

For the purpose of this unit on Imperial Japan, the first 24 minutes of the Yamamoto biography and the first 32 minutes of the Hirohito biography deal with the conditions in Japan leading to the war. The problem for the students considering these perspectives is to understand a little about the complexities and contradictions which lead a nation and people into war.

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